

Senate Education and Cultural Resources Committee
SB 81 Hearing
January 13, 2003
Supt. Linda McCulloch Remarks

For the record, I am Linda McCulloch, State Superintendent of Public Instruction. I come before you as the requesting agency for SB 81 that would provide for the issuance of an honorary high school diploma by the Office of Public Instruction to qualified veterans. I appreciate Senator Cooney for sponsoring this legislation to recognize the sacrifices, life experiences and contributions of veterans.

During WWII and the Korean Conflict thousands of young men and women across this country left high school before completing the requirements for their high school diploma to serve in the military. At an age where most are concerned about proms, football games, and graduation parties, WWII veterans were landing at Omaha Beach or Guadalcanal, flying bombing runs over Germany, or imprisoned for months or even years as POWs on hostile, foreign soils. Upon returning home, many of these veterans were not able to finish high school for a variety of reasons. They led productive lives and built our communities over their lifetime. These veterans have made significant contributions to this country while gaining substantial knowledge and skills through work. Senate Bill 81 recognizes that what they did not get in the school classroom, they learned in the classroom of life.

Interestingly, WWII had a tremendous impact on the adult learning system that we have in place today. The GED Tests were created to assess the level of help veterans needed to meet their educational and vocational goals without returning to the high school classroom. Later, it became apparent that civilians who had not completed high school could also benefit from the GED Tests.

I am particularly pleased to tell you that this request doesn't come with a cost to the State of Montana. There is neither a fee, nor any additional requirements necessary beyond having attended a Montana school and having served in the military during World War II or the Korean Conflict. We modeled the Montana legislation after reviewing twenty-six states that have adopted similar legislation since 1999.

You may be concerned that this bill is a bit too late since nationally more than 1,000 WWII veterans die daily. Yes, it would have been nice if Montana had enacted legislation sooner. But, it is not too late. We do not know how many veterans would take advantage of this legislation, but we do know that nationally Montana ranks #2 per capita for veterans. As of 2001, more than 18,000 WWII vets and nearly 15,000 Korean Conflict veterans resided in Montana. Both my office and the veteran's community have received recent requests. Our office has received several requests seeking a diploma for a family member, but we did not have in place a process in which to respond. SB 81 creates a mechanism for Montana to recognize our veterans including application by a family member if an eligible veteran is deceased.

I would like to take a moment to especially thank teacher Tom Paxson and his students Alex, Krista, and Jason from Helena's Project Alternative Learning High School for their time and effort to work on this bill. Their commitment exemplifies Montana's tradition of high quality teaching in the classroom. These students will assist OPI and the veteran's community to learn about this legislation and ultimately organize a ceremony to honor recipients. School districts will also be engaged in the ceremonial process for their local veterans. Presenting these veterans with honorary diplomas is but one small way for a community to say thank you. But, it is so much more. It is a living history connection that spans generations. It is an educational event that brings meaning to what students study in school.

On a personal note, my father did not graduate from High School. He was one of those WWII veterans that spent much of the war in a POW camp located in Poland. I spent my childhood listening to my father's stories about the war, the men that he served with from all across the United States (some of whom he still communicates with today), and the tragedies of war. I also heard him express regret and embarrassment because he did not have a high school diploma. As I grew up I watched his lack of a High School education lead to a difficulty in being able to get a better job. The provision of honorary diplomas as outlined in Senate Bill 81 eliminates this stigma and recognizes the value that our veterans' life experiences had in completing their high school education.

Thank you for your kind consideration of Senate Bill 81 to honor those in our community who were forced to discontinue their high school education due to wartime circumstances. I look forward to the opportunity to celebrate the life achievements and contributions of these individuals as we present them with their high school diplomas.

Thank you for your time today!